



The Twelve Religious Tribes of American Politics

Understanding the Real Role of Faith in Elections and Policymaking

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. I would like to thank you all for joining us this morning.

Today, as part of our ongoing series about religion and politics, we are very pleased to welcome Steven Waldman, Editor-in-Chief and CEO of the largest religious and spiritual site on the Web today, beliefnet.com. His presentation this morning is based on an article called "The Twelve Religious Tribes of American Politics: Understanding the Real Role of Faith in Elections and Policymaking," that he coauthored with [John Green](#), a senior fellow at the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#), that appeared in the January-February issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In this essay, they analyze various cultural and religious issues and evaluate their significance in winning elections and in policymaking today.

Although our country has had a long tradition of separation of church and state, religion has come to play an increasingly significant role in our political life. Whether we agree or disagree, approve or disapprove of this direction or not, it is a fact: religion is an element of our political discourse. Giving credence to this notion is the President himself, who was once quoted as saying he believed God wanted him to be president. Now, thanks to [George W.](#) and his Administration, we are more acutely aware of how religion can affect so many parts of our daily lives, whether it is science, education, the environment, or politics.

Yet even with this Administration's emphasis on faith and moral values, upon closer examination, their impact may not be exactly what we have been led to believe. In fact, based on the research Steven and his colleague conducted after the 2004 presidential election, they concluded that the emphasis on the religious-and-moral-values vote had been exaggerated and its impact misunderstood. With talk of the 2008 presidential campaign looming and, with political strategists sitting down to plot their winning campaigns, I think you will find it very interesting to listen to Steve's reassessment of this relationship between values and voting, while at the same time considering how values may influence politics in the future.

As Editor-in-Chief of the premier site for online religion, Mr. Waldman follows religious matters very closely, often viewing the subject through the prism of politics. In founding beliefnet.com, our guest has shown unusual enterprise and initiative. In fact, *Time* magazine included him among the top 100 innovators of this new century, naming him one of six religious innovators and a leader who "will guide our inner lives" in the years to come.

For those of you who are not familiar with this site, I just want to take a moment to tell you a little bit

about it, because it really is fascinating. To begin with, Beliefnet is a place where people of all faiths can share prayers, debate matters of faith, and discuss all things spiritual online. Just to give you an idea of its popularity, Steven told me that Beliefnet receives 2.5 million visitors a month and over 5.5 million people subscribe to their newsletter each month. Just think about that for a minute—2.5 million hits a month! That's really astounding.

Previously, Mr. Waldman was the National Editor of *U.S. News and World Report* and also worked in *Newsweek's* Washington bureau as a writer and editor. Earlier, he served as Editor of the *Washington Monthly*, an influential political magazine. Please join me in welcoming our guest.

Remarks

STEVEN WALDMAN: Thank you very much. I remember the day of the election and the very early exit-poll analysis that started to show that the number-one issue that voters said they were voting on was moral values. I had a tremendous conflict of interest at that point. As the editor of a spiritual or faith Web site, I was thrilled by that news. I thought, "The more this election is about religion, the better for Beliefnet." I had strong instincts to overhype the story myself.

But as we looked into the data a little bit more, it turned out that it was true that that exit poll listed moral issues as the number-one issue, but actually only about 22 percent said that. The next closest number was 21 percent or 20 percent. So the other way of looking at that is that 80 percent said that something other than moral values was the most important factor.

John Green is the leading political scientist on matters of faith and elections in the United States, at the University of Akron. He and I had become frustrated with the idea that when you talk about religion and politics, particularly in the popular media, you basically have the religious Right and everyone else; there is a sense that those are really the only two categories out there. That is not really accurate. The American political landscape—or the religio-political landscape—is as varied and diverse and textured as the spiritual landscape itself is. So we decided to look at this and try to home in a little bit more on what was actually going on.

My unfortunate tendencies from *Newsweek* days to come up with catchy packaging for everything pushed us in the direction of the "Twelve Tribes." Naturally, any of you out here who are social scientists will cringe when I tell you this: Actually, when we crunched the numbers, we came up with eleven tribes. But that lost some of the poetry and metaphor to it, so we went back into the data and thought, "There must be, surely, one of these eleven tribes that could split to create a twelfth." I'll leave it to you to figure out which the phantom tribe is.

I am going to walk through this a little bit in terms of how we ended up dividing this up—not all the tribes, but I think the most interesting and key ones. First, I'll talk about the religious Right. It is actually a term I don't use that much. I usually refer to "religious conservatives," because religious conservatives believe that the term "religious Right" now has become a pejorative term. But my rule of thumb is that if I use "the religious Left," I can use "the religious Right."

Twelve point six percent of the electorate are religious conservatives. By the way, the way we came up with these categories was through a whole series of questions that matched political views, values views, and theological views. It had things like church attendance, prayer life, views toward the afterlife. It was kind of a mix of those types of questions.

The important thing to note about the religious Right is that it actually didn't grow from 2000 to 2004. Despite all the attention to the massive turnout of evangelicals on behalf of President Bush, the percentage of his vote and the percentage of the electorate that comprised religious conservatives was about the same as it was in the last election.

The other interesting thing, which I am going to get to a little bit later, is that the size of the religious Right is about the same size as the religious Left. You wouldn't know that from the impacts that the two groups have, which I will talk about in a minute, but that is an important point.

We created a second group, called "heartland culture warriors." This is a group that really didn't exist twenty years ago, and it was something that came about, in part, as a result of the very turbulent divisions that are happening in churches throughout the country, where churches are splitting over political kinds of issues: gender issues, the role of women, gay issues, things like that.

Essentially, you had people who had been Democratic for years who became more open to voting Republican. The biggest improvement that Bush had last election was not in the religious Right; it was in this group that we call the "heartland culture warriors," who are not traditional religious Right folks. They don't tend to be evangelical Christians, for instance. But they are very conservative. They have very conservative values on issues like gay marriage, abortion, things like that, and they moved very solidly into the Republican camp and became as much a part of the Republican coalition as the religious Right was. That was not true in previous elections.

The next group that I want to mention is called moderate evangelicals. A lot of people in New York view this as a contradiction in terms, but really evangelical Christianity is a very diverse, varied group of people. It was really only in the 1970s and 1980s that evangelicals shifted from the Democratic column to the Republican column. Even in the 1990s, Bill Clinton won about a third of the evangelical vote.

The moderate evangelicals, which we think are about a third of the evangelical population, did vote for Bush this time, and I think that is something that Democrats ought to look very carefully at, because the moderate evangelicals on a lot of political issues are actually closer to the Democrats than they are to the Republicans. But they did vote Republican this time. The reasons why are very interesting and will relate to how I think things might play out in the next election.

The assumption in a lot of the press coverage about the role of religion and how religious Christians might approach the election is that it is all about the culture-war issues—generally, abortion, gay rights, the role of religion in the public square, things like that. Those are very important.

But for moderate evangelicals—and, to some extent, for religious conservatives—there was actually something else more important operating in this election, which was the sense of personal connection they had to Bush's faith. The fact that Bush had a kind of classical redemption story to his life, that he was lost and then was found that he was an alcoholic ne'er-do-well who pulled himself out of it through the grace of God and then became president—was a kind of story line that had tremendous resonance in the evangelical community. In fact, I maintain that if Bush hadn't had a drinking problem, he wouldn't be president, because I think that it was the trajectory of that story that really gave the power to it in the evangelical community.

Also, it was just his repeated indications of faith, which, to a lot of people who weren't evangelicals, it was, "This is odd, this is inappropriate, this is off-putting." To evangelicals, it was, "Finally, someone is making us feel proud to be who we are, and not to be ashamed or feel like the intelligentsia holds us in contempt. How much more of an elite can you get than the president of the United States, who is embracing us?" I think that is actually the most important factor in this.

There is a wonderful, fascinating tape that was distributed to evangelical churches throughout the country. It was about Bush's faith life. There was a whole slew of books during the campaign about Bush's faith life, at least four or five different books just on that, mostly targeted to the evangelical community.

This tape was really interesting. It didn't mention abortion and it didn't mention gay rights in the entire hour-long show. It was all about his personal faith. It was all about hardships he has had, the troubles his businesses had and how he recovered from that, and how he had done this all through his relationship with God. That was the core message. That is part of why he had such strong support in the evangelical community.

This relates to the Democrats in a very profound way, which is that candidates who convey the sense that they either do not understand religion or are not sensitive to it or are not religious themselves will start

off alienating a huge percentage of the population.

Those are kind of the solidly Republican tribes—the religious conservatives, the heartland culture warriors, and, for now, the moderate evangelicals.

Going over to the Democratic side, you have the religious Left, which, as I said, is actually about the same size as the religious Right, which always surprises people, because if you think about impact and presence in the political world, you wouldn't say that.

There is the whole question of why that is and why the political Left has been so ineffective in recent years—and I make that "recent" underlined, because if you go back to the 1960s and the antiwar movement and the civil rights movement, it was very much driven or at least very influenced—by progressive religious people. But in more recent years, the party has been more dominated by a more secular sentiment that has somewhat submerged the religious Left as a force in the Democratic Party and made it less cohesive.

There is another group, called "spiritual but not religious," which is about 5.3 percent, that is solidly Democratic. I am actually going to skip over that. It is a confusing group, and I don't really have a good handle it, and it's not that big.

African-Americans are 9.6 percent of the electorate. When people used to say, "How come there is no religious Left?" I would say, "There is. It's called African-Americans." The African-American population, which is solidly Democratic, is by far the most religious sector of the Democratic Party, and on many measures they are the same as the religious Right. In terms of religious practice, they are very similar to the religious Right, and in terms of conservatism on a lot of social issues they are actually very close to the religious Right. I think one of the great untold, or less appreciated, facts of this last election is that, by and large, Bush's efforts to appeal to African-Americans and improve his standing among African-Americans did not work all that well nationally.

In some places it did work well. One of them was Ohio, which, as you may remember, was the decisive state that put Bush back in the White House. He almost doubled the share of African-Americans that he had in Ohio from one election to the next. Why was that? It was not, I don't believe, as some have speculated, [the faith-based initiative](#), which was certainly popular. It was his position on gay marriage. It was the conservative African-Americans, oftentimes led by the clergy, in Ohio that moved Republican. So to some degree, Bush was reelected because conservative blacks in Ohio were angry at the Democrats for their position on gay marriage.

Seculars make up 10.7 percent of the electorate and they are an important bloc in the Democratic Party. It's something like a quarter to a third of the Democratic Party. There is somewhat of a similar phenomenon among seculars that you have among religious conservatives in the Republican Party, which is that every political party always has to deal with the dilemma of how you appeal to your different factions, keep the coalition together, without becoming so identified with one faction that it turns off the middle of the population. That has always been the question about the religious Right and the Republican Party: Would they become so identified with the religious Right that it would alienate the middle?

But that question is not often asked about the secular part of the Democratic Party. The secular part of the Democratic Party is about the same size as the religious Right. It has exerted enormous influence on the party. There are a lot of examples of this, but there is one that was personally interesting to me.

During the campaign, we were doing a series of interviews with candidates about their spiritual lives. We have never had any trouble getting Republicans to talk about this stuff. We had interviewed George Bush in the last election, and we had interviewed all sorts of Republican politicians. We asked all of the Democratic candidates to do interviews. The only one who said yes was [Wesley Clark](#). All of the rest of them turned us down.

One of them accidentally forwarded an email to me that was intended for his press secretary. It was an internal exchange between some of the staff of one of the candidates. It asked, "Do we talk about

religion?" The answer is, no, they don't talk about religion. That was part of the problem.

The solid Republican tribes and the solid Democratic tribes make up about 35 percent of the electorate. That is not enough for either side to win. This is a truism, and always has been: You still win elections by getting enough of the center. So in religious terms what is the center?

The most important centrist group that we identify we call "convertible Catholics." Some Catholics are very conservative, and we put them with the culture warriors. They are just solidly conservative; they are Republican; they ought to be Republican. Some Catholics are very liberal; they are solidly Democratic; they ought to be Democratic.

Then there is a substantial group, we think about 7 percent of the population, that is in the middle. As the political scientists say, they are cross-pressured by a number of different factors. They tend to be more liberal on economic issues. They tend to be a bit more conservative on cultural issues—not nearly as conservative as conservative Catholics, but a little bit more. They tend to be not fully anti-abortion, but uncomfortable with abortion. Those are the distinctions that I would make.

Bush won this group with 55 percent. I forget the number that [Gore](#) had, but Gore won the plurality in the previous election. It's really interesting to think about. Southern Baptist Al Gore did better among Catholics than Catholic [John Kerry](#) did. In fact, if John Kerry, the first Catholic nominee since 1960, had done as well among Catholics as Al Gore did, he would have won the election. That was one of the central religious stories of the campaign: Why did Kerry lose Catholics? That, to me, is as important as what happened with evangelical Christians.

I am not sure I totally have the answer to that. Some of it really didn't have to do with culture-war issues; it just had to do with the fact that they liked Bush's approach to terrorism more. At that time, they were supportive of the war. In the next election it's going to be the same thing: Candidates that can really appeal to this group will win the election.

Related to that is Latinos. Latinos went 55 percent for Kerry. So Bush got 45 percent. But in the previous election he had only gotten 28 percent, so probably the group that he made the most progress with was Hispanics. A lot of people assumed that it is the same thing as the convertible Catholics, that it was Hispanic Catholics who went for Bush for the same reasons that a lot of the other ones did.

Actually, there are two different major religious substrata within the Hispanic community. There are Catholic and Protestant, tending to be Pentecostal Protestant. Kerry actually won among Hispanic Catholics. Where Bush shifted the ground was among Hispanic Protestants. Hispanic Protestants, as I said, tend to be Pentecostal Protestants, and they are culturally much more conservative than the Hispanic Catholics—including on abortion, interestingly. So it was among the Hispanic Protestants that he made tremendous inroads, very much with the same kind of evangelical faith-based pitch.

The last group we call "white bread Protestants." This is, I suppose, the one bit of slight good news for Democrats in the swing groups. Ten years ago this group would have been listed as a solid Republican tribe. From [William McKinley](#) to [Gerald Ford](#), this was the very solid part of the Republican coalition.

Bush still won them. He won about three-fifths of this vote. But there was some erosion, and if you burrow down more and look at the particular issues, they actually agree with Democrats on, probably, more issues than they do Republicans. They tend to be more conservative economically, which tends to hold them to the party; they are more interested in tax cuts. So it is not an easy pickup for Democrats, but they are in play.

Where does this all leave us? The question that the *Atlantic Monthly* asked us to address in doing this piece was: What is going to happen with the culture wars? Are these annoying culture wars going to continue forever? Basically, we said: yes, we think, at least in the next election, this is going to continue, but for a couple of possibly nonintuitive reasons.

Remember, before I was saying that part of Bush's appeal is his personal faith, more than his policy

views. Now I will say something probably a little bit contrarian. I believe that, by and large, Bush has not delivered for the evangelicals. If you look at what was actually promised during the campaign and you think about things like abortion and gay rights, for the religious conservatives this is the highest water mark that they will ever have: a conservative evangelical president, control of the House, the Senate, and increasing parts of the Supreme Court.

The platform of the Republican Party called for a ban on all abortion—not a ban on partial-birth abortion, a ban on all abortion. That was the official position of the Republican Party. I don't believe I have ever heard President Bush talk about that. He has never pushed for it as president. The same thing with gay marriage. Remember what a huge issue that was in the campaign, how we needed a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. I don't really remember hearing President Bush out on the hustings since the election pushing that.

This is why religious conservatives were so focused on the Supreme Court. It was what they had left. It became the central test, which is why, when [Harriet Miers was nominated](#), they just went absolutely ballistic. They said, "We gave you a pass on abortion, we gave you a pass on gay rights, we've let you do symbolic things on all these other issues on the bet that you are going to deliver on the Supreme Court, and then you give us Harriet Miers, who is not a religious conservative." They were absolutely outraged by it. I think the damage has been somewhat repaired by [John Roberts](#), to some degree, and by [Alito](#). There was some part of a rupture there that actually is not yet fixed.

What I think is actually going to happen on the Republican side is that, if the candidate does not have the same kind of personal faith connection that Bush did—and I think that probably will be hard to match—they are going to have to compensate for that by being even more conservative on substantive grounds. Which is why I think, if you look at someone like [Mitt Romney](#), who is running for president, from Massachusetts—who starts off with the double disadvantage of being from Massachusetts and being a Mormon running in Republican primaries—he is the one who is taking the lead on being most conservative on gay marriage. I think you will see that throughout the party.

The other interesting thing in the next election is that there is a lot of discussion in the Democratic Party now about this concept of the religious Left and religious values in the Democratic Party. You see all sorts of discussion on this. [Jim Wallis](#) wrote a book called [*God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*](#), which was a surprise bestseller.

It is a big issue in Democratic circles right now: How should Democrats talk about faith? They have been very uncomfortable talking about personal faith, by and large, and they have been very uncomfortable making the connection between faith and their policies. There is a real strong division in the party over this right now, and there is a division among the religious Left.

African-Americans and Hispanics, which you could argue make up a very big chunk of the Democratic coalition and the majority of the religious Left, if you lump them together, are much more conservative on cultural issues than white progressive religious people.

White religious progressives were motivated by opposition to the war, primarily. Black and Hispanic religious progressives share that view, but are much more concerned about cultural issues; they are concerned about gay marriage, abortion, things like that. That's a real tough gap for the Democrats to bridge.

The Republicans have the advantage that their coalition tends to be splintered on economic issues. There are libertarians, there are activists, but they are actually pretty cohesive around these values issues.

Democrats are kind of the other way around. They tend to be more cohesive around economic issues. They are very splintered on these culture-war issues. So I think the Democrats have to take faith seriously. They have to come up with a candidate who can talk about religion in a sincere way. They are going to have to come up with ways of convincing the public that they understand them.

I am going to leave you with one statistic that should be chilling to any Democrats in the room. I don't

know if there are any here. The Pew Forum said in 2004 that 40 percent of the population said the Democratic Party was "friendly toward religion." This was in the summer of 2004. That's pretty bad, to start with. Less than half the population thinks the Democratic Party is friendly to religion. After the election, that number had dropped to 29 percent. Only 29 percent of the public thinks that the Democratic Party is friendly to religion.

That is, I think, a devastating burden for any political party to carry. I feel confident that, having opened up that wound, the Republicans will try to make it bleed some more. That is part of why I think the culture wars will continue very combatively in the next election.

Joanne asked me to talk for a couple of minutes about Beliefnet. It was started in 1999. I was a news magazine journalist and noticed, when I was at *Newsweek* or *U.S. News*, that every time we put religion on the covers of the magazines, the sales would go way up. That was kind of interesting. All of us Upper West Side *Newsweek* editors were somewhat surprised by that. It just kept happening over and over again.

As I did research on it, it turned out that at that moment—this was 1997-98—what was the fastest-growing category in the book market? Spirituality. The fastest-growing radio-format category? Faith. Number-four TV show at the time? *Touched by an Angel*. This was before [The Passion of the Christ](#) came out and freaked out Hollywood to what was going on. Yet, if you looked at the media landscape, I felt that religion and spirituality and faith were not sufficiently well covered by the mainstream media.

So we started Beliefnet in 1999. It is a multi-faith site. It's not affiliated with a particular religion. The mission of the site is to help people meet their spiritual needs as they define them. We are there to provide articles, community, spiritual tools, devotionals, things like that, to people of all different faiths.

It also has a community area that enables people of different faiths to talk to each other or yell at each other, as well as talking to others within their own faith. It is probably one of the largest interfaith dialogues going on, on an ongoing basis. The message board area has about 200,000 posts per month.

As Joanne said, we have both a Web site and newsletters. We have 5.5 million subscribers to the newsletters, which go out daily, and actually send out 11 million a day, and then have 2.5 million unique visitors to the site per month.

I think the reason that Beliefnet exists and has grown so much relates to something that has happened in the spiritual landscape more generally. When I first started Beliefnet, I would get interviewed occasionally about all these things going on that seemed to talk about religion: "Why is religion and spirituality all of a sudden a big deal?" Everyone said, "It's 1999. Clearly, it's because we are in a time of affluence." The bubble was still bubbling. They said, "People have their material needs met, and yet they feel empty inside, and so they're turning to spirituality."

A year-and-a-half or so later, we were in a recession, and all these phenomena were continuing. Reporters called up and said, "Clearly, it's because we're in a recession. People are not having their material needs met, and they feel vulnerable and are turning to faith."

Then we had 9/11 and all these indicators of religion all over the place, and everyone said, "Clearly, it's because of 9/11. We all feel very vulnerable, in addition to the fact that Islam is something we all need to learn about now."

I don't think any of those things are the primary factors. I think it is a demographically driven phenomenon. If you look at the natural lifecycle of human beings and if you plot on a graph interest in religion or spiritual things by age, it's a straight line. Basically, as you get older, you care more about spiritual things.

The reasons are sort of intuitive. When you get married, you are figuring out what kind of wedding you are going to have; when you have kids, how you are going to raise your kids. Then, as you get older and you start dealing with the death of your parents or illness of friends, and you get older and you start

dealing with your own illness and frailty and mortality—these are all things that tend to point you towards asking bigger, deeper questions than you do when you are twenty.

If you view that as kind of the spirituality zone of the lifecycle, the Baby Boomers have entered the zone. The "pig in the python," as the demographers say, the bulge in the population, has now moved to the moment in life when they care most about spiritual stuff. That leads to these massive numbers of media consumption around spiritual topics. It also means that this is a trend that is going to be with us for a while.

So that is why I think that Beliefnet has taken off, why there was a need for a site like Beliefnet. Probably thirty years ago, something like Beliefnet couldn't have existed, even if the Internet had. It was something that matched the current spiritual landscape.

I am happy to answer any questions about either Beliefnet or faith and politics.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you. We will open the floor to questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: That was fascinating, Steve. I would like to make a prediction.

As a student at Harvard, I learned about [Reinhold Niebuhr](#), who had a great impact on me. I predict that if [Hillary Clinton](#) is the nominee of the Democratic Party, and if she's elected president—or even as candidate—there will be significant sensitivity to Niebuhrian theology. I was at Hyde Park a few weeks ago, and I heard Hillary say to somebody, "It's time for a revival of Reinhold Niebuhr." What does that mean? That means that in applying religious values, Christian or Jewish, to politics, the goal is justice. According to Niebuhr, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

In other words, I think if Hillary is the nominee, there will be no problem with the Democratic leadership being at home with religious values.

QUESTION: I am from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. I was very interested in your presentation. One aspect of the last elections was the high voter turnout, higher than the previous one. One element that was considered as relevant was the capacity to actually convince voters to vote. Have you addressed this aspect by considering the different strategies towards voting among the Twelve Tribes?

STEVEN WALDMAN: There was an increase in turnout among evangelical voters. So why did the percentage of the electorate made up by that group not change? Because there was an increase in turnout among everyone else also. People looked at the flood of new evangelicals into the voting and thought, "Oh, that's what elected Bush."

But it really was a broader increase in turnout. In fact, I believe—if I remember the numbers right—the increase in turnout was even more among the religious left, or it was quite comparable. So, basically, in percentage terms, it did not seem that any particular one group did much better than another in terms of turnout—although I shouldn't say that, because actually, some of the groups did a little bit less. But the turnout gains among the conservatives were counterbalanced by turnout gains on the Left, or vice versa.

To religious liberals, it was all very confusing, too. Look at the tremendous fervor or antiwar activism. There were all sorts of stories of people who had never voted before who were going to vote because they wanted to vote against the war. That happened, too. That's not wrong. It's just that on the Right you also had people who had never voted before who were going to vote to support the war.

We all tend to think that increases in voter turnout will somehow dramatically change the outcomes of the elections. I think one of the things this election showed is that that is not necessarily the case. I think if turnout had been less, probably the results would have been the same.

QUESTION: Thank you. That was an absolutely fascinating presentation. I don't really know how to pose this question, so let me just state my bafflement, if you will, and then you could, perhaps, respond to it.

It seems to me that the true religious values, if you look at what Jesus taught, are feeding the poor, healing the sick. In Judaism, they always left a certain amount of acreage fallow so that those who owned no land could plant and could reap a harvest. But the religious Right, it seems to me, focuses on social issues—guns, homosexuality, abortion. What about these religious values among these religious groups? I'm totally confused by this. They refer to themselves as religious—religious Right, religious Left—but they are not focusing on religious values.

STEVEN WALDMAN: I think a case could be made that both are about religious values, but because Democrats abdicated the playing field and did not use Niebuhrian rhetoric or thinking, or did not talk about the social justice aspects of the Bible, they let conservatives define what it meant to be religious in a political context.

There are a number of people who are really trying to do exactly what you are saying. In *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis's book—which is really, I think, the best of the breed of kind of progressive religious books—he has a wonderful anecdote. He used to carry a Bible around that had cut out all the references to the poor in it, so that you could see how "holey" it was when all the references to the poor were gone. That's a big part of the New Testament.

I'm Jewish and I'm no New Testament scholar, but I know that much, that concern for the poor is a fairly important part of the New Testament. He was making that point through this visual means.

I just got a note yesterday that Wallis and another progressive evangelical named [Tony Campolo](#) are attempting to coin a phrase called "red-letter Christians." I forget which translations of the Bible have the quotes from Jesus himself in red. Not all do, but many do. So they're saying, "We're red-letter Christians, in the sense that we focus on Jesus's actual teachings."

I have thrown your bafflement to religious conservatives. I think gay issues are really tough for them to defend on biblical grounds.

QUESTIONER: What about guns?

STEVEN WALDMAN: I actually haven't heard the religious conservatives talk about that as much as about abortion. If you start off as they do with the premise that abortion is killing, they would say, "What is possibly a more profound moral issue than stopping killing?" They would say, in the strongest possible terms, that "Absolutely, this is a religious issue."

Now, you have to deal with the disagreements about when life begins and whether something is killing or murder, or not. But if you start with the premise, as they do, that it is murder, then I believe, absolutely, it is a moral and religious issue. I just don't think it's the only one. Because Democrats have been reluctant to cast their political views in these religious terms in the last twenty years?as I said, this was not always the case?it has allowed conservatives to define what it means to be religious.

QUESTIONER: May I just follow up, very quickly? The Democrats' platform has been that the government has responsibility to care for people who can't care for themselves—the poor, medical care, so forth. Does this have to be put in religious rhetoric in order to be accepted by religious Christians and Jews?

STEVEN WALDMAN: It doesn't have to be, but if they want to win elections it has to be. The other day I was reading *Common Sense*, the pamphlet by [Tom Paine](#). We think of Tom Paine as the ultimate Enlightenment thinker. He was actually attacked for being an atheist?about as Enlightenment a guy as you can get. I hadn't realized until I reread this recently that one of the central early arguments he made was a biblical analogy. He said royalty should be overthrown because the Bible showed that monarchy was a sin. He said the major sin of the Jews was adhering to monarchy. I don't know whether Tom Paine was feeling deeply religious when he wrote that; or whether he merely realized that that was the *lingua*

franca and if you wanted to convince anyone of anything you had to talk in those terms.

I don't mean to sound cynical about it, but 83 percent of Americans say religion is an important part of their lives; 93 percent of Americans say that they believe in God. A party that does not reflect that simply won't win.

JOANNE MYERS: I just want to take a commercial break right here. If you want to know more about Reinhold Niebuhr, you can go to our website, because [Elisabeth Sifton, his daughter, spoke at the Carnegie Council](#) a few months ago.

QUESTION: I'm interested in whether you have made any comparisons with any other countries in this kind of trend. Is this something unique to the United States? I know that when you do surveys on religion and faith, you get varied responses if you go to Canada or go to Europe and so forth.

STEVEN WALDMAN: We haven't done anything in the depth that we did with this. My understanding of this is that among Western European countries, the United States, in all sorts of measures, shows up as much more religious in terms of practice and much more likely to insert religious ideas and rhetoric into political campaigns, and that that has been true for a long time.

Obviously, as we can see what is going on in the world right now, you can overstate that. There is plenty of religious argument and discord in the rest of the world. But the kind of overt role of religion in politics, I believe, is more pronounced in the United States. As far as I can tell, there are not big shifts, of this degree, among the Western European countries toward this. I think there are probably a lot of other people in the room who can answer that better than I. There are certainly candidates who come up periodically in different parties in either Europe or Canada that emphasize it a little bit more or a little bit less. But it seems to be, in general, a different order of magnitude than what we have in the United States.

Outside of Western Europe it's a whole different thing. In the Middle East and in Muslim countries, obviously, religion is a much more central thing. In India it's much more central, and in Latin America. So, globally, probably the United States is somewhere in the middle of the pack. In terms of developed countries, it is by far the most intense in terms of faith as a factor.

QUESTION: You talked a lot about white Christians. Your chart has Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, seculars here under "self-explanatory." They don't explain themselves to me. Maybe you could say just a little bit about how Muslims and others did vote, and whether Bush gained there or not.

STEVEN WALDMAN: There was a practical problem in trying to assess Jews and Muslims, which is that as a percentage of the population and of the electorate, Jews and Muslims together make up less than 5 percent of the population, collectively? or around 5 percent. Statistically, it just makes it very difficult to get a sample that's big enough to study them. The short answer is that we don't really know.

There have been some surveys of just Muslims and of just Jews. What they basically showed was two interesting things; I just don't think they had a big impact on the election.

One was that Muslims had voted for Bush in 2000 and voted for Kerry in 2004. Bush had the chance to have Muslims be a part of the Republican coalition. They tend to be more conservative on social issues, as a group, and were definitely trending Republican. After the war—and, more importantly, [the Patriot Act](#)—they basically lost a lot of Muslim voters over that

The only state where that might have had an impact was Michigan, where there is a large percentage of Muslims, enough to potentially have an impact—though I think Kerry won Michigan by enough that it wouldn't matter.

Bush made some headway among Jews, not as much as they had hoped. They actually made a real effort. I believe that they did improve a little bit, mostly among conservative Jews. Moderate and liberal Jews pretty much voted Democratic, the way they always had. It was largely over the war. Jews by and large were more supportive of the war than any other part of the Democratic coalition, I believe. That

was where the appeal came from. Whether that can be continued in another election I don't know. I doubt it. But it depends on how the parties approach terrorism.

QUESTION: I am just wondering how religious groups that oppose abortion on the grounds of killing support the death penalty. How they reconcile that?

STEVEN WALDMAN: Some of them don't. Some of them don't reconcile it or attempt to reconcile it in any way that's persuasive. Some of them—the Catholic church, most notably—do and have a consistent view on that. There is debate about it within the conservative world, but, I think, not enough. Obviously, those who hold the political position that, for moral reasons, they are opposed to abortion but supportive of the death penalty usually make the argument that it's innocent life versus guilty life, and that that's a valid distinction that one can make.

But I think in the last ten years there has been more discussion, usually not publicly, among conservatives about that issue. It is, I think, part of why you did see a little bit of a shift in public opinion away from the death penalty after the public examples of the very bad process of evidence and unfair convictions. There was a little bit of a shift among conservatives, among evangelicals in particular, I think, on the death penalty.

JOANNE MYERS: I thank you for an absolutely fascinating discussion.

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